DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 349 254 SO 022 572

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TITLE Strengthening Minority Involvement in Law-Related Education. Technical Assistance Bulletin, No. 9.
INSTITUTION American Bar Association, Chicago, Ill. Special Committee on Youth Education for Citizenship.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquent Prevention (Dept. of Justice), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 6p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Citizenship Education; Elementary Secondary Education; Ethnic Groups; *Law Related Education; Lawyers; *Minority Groups; *Program Development; *State Programs; Student Needs; Student Participation
IDENTIFIERS *American Bar Association

ABSTRACT

Educators concerned with law-related education (LRE) increasingly have recognized the need to ensure the participation of diverse groups of people in LRE programs. In 1988 the American Bar Association's Special Committee for Citizenship began the Minority Involvement in Law Education Initiative. Among its purposes was to promote and encourage the involvement of racial and ethnic minority students, teachers, and legal professionals in law-related education programs. Since the initiative was begun, minority involvement conferences with participants from 13 states have been held. This article describes the benefits derived from these conferences, who attends and what happens at a typical conference, and activities that have been undertaken by various states in following-up the conferences. (DB)

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Strengthening Minority Involvement in Law-Related Education

Technical Assistance Bulletin No. 9

American Bar Association Special Committee on
Youth Education for Citizenship

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Bulletin

American Bar Association *Special Committee on Youth Education for Citizenship*

Strengthening Minority Involvement In Law-Related Education

by George S. Perry, Jr.

America in the late 20th century is a society in transition. New mixes of racial and ethnic groups are introducing additional tensions to an already taut social fabric, with the dynamics inherent in such interaction having obvious significance for those involved with law-related education.

Coupled with a growing recognition that the perspectives and participation of diverse groups of people can enrich the LRE experience for student and teacher alike, these growing tensions have led law-related educators to seek ways to forge bonds with groups that have traditionally been underrepresented—and often underserved. While a variety of approaches have been attempted to make LRE more inclusive, none, however, have proven successful with all groups and in all places; there is no panacea, no single solution.

With this caveat, this bulletin will describe a strategy used by 13 state projects to interest and engage minority members of the legal professions, teachers and students in law-related education. It will examine the challenges, approaches and discoveries that have been part of the Minority Involvement in Law-Related Education Initiative sponsored by the ABA Special Committee on Youth Education for Citizenship (ABA/YEFC).

Direct Approach

There are always challenges when broadening a project's constituencies. Among them: Inclusion strategies are resource intensive as they rely on building personal contacts. The benefits are not always immediate. It takes time to develop an understanding of the issues that are important to the target audience and to identify key individuals who have credibility in the networks of the target groups. Further, the starting point of inclusion strategies is not always apparent. Developing materials that contain concepts and language most appropriate for the target audience can be costly. As the limited resources of law-related education projects are consumed in maintaining existing programs and responding to requests for assistance, necessary resources may not be readily available to support an intensive effort.

> *"A project, even one that has an impressive commitment to minority involvement, can benefit from an explicit statement or event to demonstrate its understanding of the importance of involving minorities in law-related education."* —Beth Farnbach, Pennsylvania state law-related education coordinator

In spite of these difficulties, some state project directors have faced these challenges directly. They believe it is important that law-related education meets the needs of all students.

Framework for Cooperation

ABA/YEFC began the Minority Involvement in Law-Related Education Initiative in 1988 with funding from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The purposes of the initiative include:

- promoting and encouraging involvement of racial and ethnic minority students, teachers and legal professionals in law-related education programs; and
- seeking input from minority community members in the design of law-related education programs reflecting the needs and interests of minority students.

To accomplish these purposes, ABA/YEFC, in cooperation with state law-related education projects, has sponsored minority involvement conferences in Chicago (for teams from Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin); Philadelphia (for the state of Pennsylvania); Columbia (for teams from Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina); Seattle (for teams from Idaho, Oregon and Washington); and Little Rock (for teams from Arkansas and Mississippi). These conferences initiate or enhance the efforts of state law-

related education projects to increase the involvement of minority legal professionals, educators and students in law-related education.

Benefits from the conference often emerge early in the planning process as the state law-related education coordinators initiate contact with potential conference participants. For projects with existing relationships with minority communities, the conference serves as an opportunity to reinforce and expand those contacts. For others, the conference, and the planning process, provides a focus for building a working relationship. Linda Start, the Michigan LRE coordinator, expressed a generally-held view that she "invited people to introduce them to law-related education and to gain their support in accessing networks in the minority community." In addition, the conference offers an opportunity for state coordinators to introduce themselves and their projects to a new audience. The conference serves as a focal point for collaboration, as well as providing a foundation for future cooperation.

For example, in Illinois, Pennsylvania and South Carolina, state coordinators identified their objective for conducting the conference as strengthening their existing inclusion efforts. They selected participants who were leaders in minority communities. In other states, coordinators seized the opportunity offered by the conference to initiate contact with minority organizations, resource people and teachers. Participants in those states were selected in an effort to build "grass-roots" support for law-related education within the minority community.

State law-related education coordinators shared similar expectations for their participation in these conferences. Lynnette Hoyt-McBrayer, the Mississippi law-related education coordinator, represented the thoughts of some of her colleagues who were most interested in "receiving the input of minority educators on ways that law-related education could best serve their needs." Margaret Armancas-Fisher, the Washington state LRE coordinator, clearly defined her expectations as "identifying the issues of underrepresentation of minorities in the legal profession and the limited understanding of minority youth of the law and legal system; examining potential barriers to overcoming issues of underrepresentation and suggesting solutions to these problems; and exposing teachers to resources upon which they can draw."

A Typical Conference: Who, What and Why

The target audiences of the conferences included African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans and Asian Americans. Different groups were emphasized depending on the demographics of the states served by the conference. Participants in the conferences included attorneys, law-enforcement, youth services and corrections professionals, judges, teachers, church leaders and law students. High school students also participated in two of the conferences.

Each conference agenda reflected a similar format, although the specific activities were different. The purposes of the conference were reinforced by a speaker supportive of law-related education. Examples of interactive law-related education activities were presented. With this new understanding of law-related education, participants were prepared to discuss ways that law-related education can respond to the needs of minority youth. (See the box on page 4 for a sample conference agenda.)

Featured speakers included federal and state court judges, a commissioner of corrections, university professors and attorneys. Most spoke on the challenges facing minority youth; others examined the opportunities for minorities in legal professions. Regardless of their approach, the speakers generally emphasized the importance of providing minority youth with an improved understanding of the law and the legal system.

Workshops were presented to expand the participants' knowledge of law-related education. Popular lessons, such as "No Vehicles in the Park," were offered at some conferences. In others, the activities focused on themes directly related to the conference, such as "Indian Treaties and the Law," "Bilingual Lessons on Justice and Authority," and "Advice and Consent: Alternatives to Selecting Supreme Court Justices."

These activities provided participants with a common understanding of law-related education and informed the small group discussions that followed. Through facilitated discussions, conference participants grappled with ways that law-related education could reflect the needs and interests of minority youth. The participants considered three focus questions examining: (1) minority youth's level of knowledge about the law and the areas they need to know; (2) barriers within schools and communities to addressing the needs of minority youth; and (3) ways that law-related

Bulletin

American Bar Association Special Committee on Youth Education for Citizenship

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This is one in a series of technical assistance bulletins on law-related education published by the American Bar Association Special Committee on Youth Education for Citizenship, 541 N. Fairbanks Court, Chicago, IL 60611-3314; (312) 988-5735.

This bulletin is made possible by a grant from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice, grant number 85-JS-CX-0003. We are grateful for their support.

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education programs could be improved. As one might expect, the responses to the questions posed were as diverse as the students who were their focus. The information garnered from these discussions was used by state LRE coordinators to design future programs and follow-up activities, and is capsulized in the following paragraphs.

What Do Young People Know About the Law?

Most young people know less about the law than they should, and more than is assumed they do. Young people have limited knowledge about the law and the legal process, and its relevance to them. Most of their perceptions about the law have been formed from information provided by their peers, their viewing of television, and/or their personal contact with the law. Often, young people hold negative views about the application of law, particularly as applied to minorities and the poor. Moreover, the law is often perceived as outside of their influence.

Young people need more information about the purpose of law, ways that laws can be changed and government can be accessed, their responsibilities in our society based upon law, and the consequences of their actions. They should have contact with the individuals who work in the legal and justice systems. To balance their often negative perceptions, young people should receive more historical and contemporary examples of how the law has improved the situations of minorities socially, politically and economically.

What Barriers are Present?

While there is general agreement about the existence of barriers to meeting the needs of minority youth, there was little agreement on the nature of those barriers. Many conference participants do not believe the barriers facing minority youth differ from those facing all youth. These barriers include problems of communication between adults and students; the apathy of parents, the lack of parental oversight, and lack of community concern and involvement; the lack of parental knowledge about the law; and the lack of positive role models. Yet, others believe the problems facing minority youth are more acute and should be addressed through the development of special programs and curricula.

How Can LRE Programs Meet These Needs?

Knowing what young people need, recognizing the problems they face, and creating solutions to address them were underscored as key elements of successful law-related education programs. Broad-based support from school and community groups (school administrators, judges, attorneys, elected officials, church groups, and social organizations) is necessary to start and sustain successful programs.

The following were the most common suggestions for improving law-related education:

- Adult-student interaction is an important component of law-related education programs. More attention should be directed to: (1) increased opportunities for out-of-school visits with legal professionals to gain a better understanding of their responsibilities; and (2) increasing in-school opportunities for all students to interact with successful minority legal professionals including paralegals, court clerks, court reporters, bailiffs, and civil/family court mediators, lawyers and judges.

> *"The conference provided the state project with 1) a focus for interaction with the minority bar associations and organizations to inquire and learn about the programs, initiatives and outreach they offer; 2) an opportunity to increase the state project's credibility with minorities by offering an activity that demonstrates its commitment to inclusion; 3) a list of resources and people who are interested in and available to support law-related education; and 4) a springboard to other programs."* —Margaret Armancas-Fisher, Washington law-related education coordinator

- There is a need for more and targeted curricular materials and approaches that: (1) reflect the diversity of the students and their community; (2) emphasize decision-making and the consequences of actions; and (3) increase law-related education at the elementary level.
- Training for teachers is a key element in improving law-related education in schools. Teachers could benefit from additional training opportunities, particularly in the effective use of resource people.
- Parents have an important role in shaping the attitudes of their children. Parents need a better understanding the legal process and system so that they may be able to foster attitudes of respect for the law. To assist parents, schools should offer adult education courses in law-related education and/or create a handbook for parents.

Participants in the conferences often discussed their role as positive role models, and advocates for youth. They urged each other to be more active in their communities and to make a personal contribution to the development of youth.

Student Participation at the Conferences

Each conference embellished the basic format of speakers, awareness activities and discussions. For example, the Philadelphia conference contained two simultaneous tracks: one for adults, and one for Philadelphia high school students. The student and adult participants were together during the opening and closing plenary sessions. The adults followed the conference format described above. The student track

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offered information on legal professions (e.g., entry requirements, life on campus) and involved the students in interactive law-related education activities which introduced legal concepts. In addition, high school students were grouped and assigned to Temple University Law School students who answered individual questions during informal sessions.

The Philadelphia model allowed the project's board members and conference participants to observe students engaged in law-related education lessons, demonstrating the success of LRE in promoting understanding of legal concepts. For legal professionals and LRE proponents generally, student participation in conference activities provided the added benefit of reinforcing their belief in the efficacy of their work.

Student participation enriched the Seattle conference as well. The conference was held at Franklin High School, and the school's mock trial team was scheduled as the concluding activity. The students participated in the small group discussions about the barriers and challenges that they and other students face. At the end of the conference, the students expressed their appreciation for being allowed to participate in the discussion groups, particularly the opportunity to discuss issues of discrimination with a range of adults.

Follow-up Activities

In some states, the conference served as a catalyst for continued involvement in law-related education. Teachers in North Carolina, for example, have become trainers in one of the National Training and Dissemination Program's curricula, or have become active in other educational organizations. Leaders of minority bar associations, such as those in Indiana and Michigan, have become personally involved in law-related education programs and have convinced others to be visible role models for students by making presentations in classrooms and serving as judges of competitions. Networks of people supportive of law-related education have been developed or expanded.

One example of the networking opportunities possible was provided at the Little Rock conference. Listening to a teacher describe her frustration and concern over incidents of racial unrest occurring at her school, Judge George Howard, Jr., a U.S. district court judge in Little Rock who spoke at the conference, was moved to offer his assistance. After lunch, Judge Howard asked the teacher to accompany him to his office, which was a short distance from the conference site, and they scheduled a time for him to visit her school and meet with students.

In Washington, the law-related education project has created a "Judges in the Classroom" program. This program was stimulated by the participation of judges at the Seattle conference. Ninety judges have volunteered to be paired with teachers and use a classroom lesson plan developed by state law-related education project.

Some states have conducted state-wide minority involvement conferences that were planned by the participants of the nationally-sponsored conference. For example, 100 people attended South Carolina's state minority involvement conference that followed six months after the Columbia conference. The participants were mostly white teachers seeking new strategies for working with their minority students, and African American community resource people including youth services professionals and church leaders. The speakers addressed the common problems experienced by juveniles and the effects of economics on violence and crime. A college theatre group presented an engaging drama on teen problems. The workshops used law-related education lessons and interactive strategies to address issues identified in the earlier conference.

The Columbia conference also provided an opportunity for the Georgia Law-Related Education Project to build upon its minority involvement activities. The Minority Outreach Committee of the Georgia Law-Related Education Consortium was created to continue the progress made at the conference in Columbia. This committee decided to conduct a state-wide conference following the format of the earlier conference. The Georgia Bar Foundation funded a state conference that was attended by an energetic group of 30 individuals, including attorneys, educators, judges, and members of the state board of paroles and pardons. The participants became excited about law-related education. The state conference has increased the involvement of minority teachers and legal professionals in law-related education.

This state initiative has taken another form in the past year. Three regional workshops are planned for different sections of Georgia. Twenty-five people participated in the first of these regional conferences, including law enforcement professionals. The participants' recommendations have stimulated a variety of program activities including the development of a media presentation that can be used in schools, and a teacher workshop "Getting Along Together," focusing on the needs of minority youth.

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A Sample Agenda for a Minority Involvement in LRE Conference

- Welcome from Conference Cosponsors
- Keynote Address
- Overview of LRE
- LRE Activities
- Luncheon (including display of LRE materials)
- State Meetings
- Small Group Discussions (with summaries and recommendations reported to the large group (Knowledge, Barriers, Improvements)
- Conclusion